

SELF-CONFIDENCE

by Rabbi Pinchas Winston

Also count the descendants of Gershon according to their paternal line and family . . . (Bamidbar 4:22)

Self-belief is important. It is at the core of all we do. Yet, it is so vulnerable and can be destroyed in a moment after years of being built up. How many times has someone said the wrong thing and crushed a friend for life? How many bosses have destroyed the confidence of their employees? How many teachers have made their students despair? How many times has a person failed at something and doubted himself ever since?

It is interesting how something can be so important to survival and yet be so overlooked. People don't overlook air because they can't survive without it. They don't take food for granted because they need it to live. They can't do much with their lives without self-confidence, so why do they ignore its importance until they are really put to the test?

What is self-confidence anyhow? What do we actually believe in when we believe in ourselves? Self-confidence may be at the core of all that we do, but what is at the core of self-confidence?

When we think of self-confident people we often come up with cocky individuals. So many people with self-confidence seem to have too much of it and can be annoying. Sports players are great at what they do because they believe in themselves. Yet, many tend to get into trouble because they believe in themselves too much.

Or is it just the opposite? Is it because they lack true self-confidence that they get in trouble. If the latter is true, then what are they exhibiting when they excel in their professions? Are there different kinds of self-confidence? Can self-confidence be limited to a particular type of act or skill? Can a person succeed brilliantly in one case and fall apart in another?

When we used to tell our Rosh HaYeshivah that we couldn't do something, he would tell us that saying "I can't" is idol worship. What he meant was that by saying what we couldn't do, we implied that what we could do was a function of our own strength and ability. It is not. It all comes from God, the strength and the ability to anything and everything.

If so, then where does skill and practice come into the picture? So much of self-confidence seems to come from seeing oneself succeed at some task over-and-over-again. Natural skill gives a person a head start, but even naturally-talented people have to succeed several times before a task

becomes second nature to them and they can do it with constant success. Geniuses may learn faster and go farther, but they'll admit that they had to practice to learn what they do.

The answer to this question, as is usually the case with questions of this nature, is free will. This world is not about succeeding at tasks, as the Talmud states:

All is in the hands of Heaven except the fear of God. (*Brochos* 34b)

This means that success in life is determined by Heaven. Sometimes it may occur as we hoped or expected it would. Other times the reverse is true: success comes from when we least expect it. It is the master plan for Creation, the Divine Big Picture, that determines the success of a person or event, especially since what we call "success" in the short run can often be the opposite in the long run.

What we do control is our fear of God. This amounts to seeing the hand of God in every aspect of life, and responding accordingly. Miracles remove the challenge of doing this, and therefore reduce the potential reward one can receive in the World-to-Come for having taken note of *Hashgochah Pratis*—Divine Providence. It is when a situation "buries" the hand of God in "natural" causes for success, that one is most challenged to do what he is here to do: reveal God in the world.

Skill? Practice? They naturalize the miracle. Everything that we do as humans, starting with just living itself, is a great miracle, albeit one that we take for granted.

Starting with the body, a magnificently well-organized and fantastically coordinated lump of flesh, and ending off with the soul, a "piece" of God Himself that gives us life and allows us to accomplish so much, man is a walking marvel that cannot be matched by even the greatest of technologies. The combination of the two has resulted in a long history of incomprehensible levels of seamless accomplishments that are too overwhelming for the average person to contemplate and appreciate, so they don't.

At the core of all of it is . . . God Himself. The "how" is not as important at this moment as the "is." Our bodies exist and function as they do because God wills it, continuously. There is no autopilot, just constant flow of Divine light that creates and maintains the body the entire time. The talent a person is born with? That's God willing it. The skill the person develops? That's God making it possible and making it happen. It's all God.

Then there is the matter of the soul inside. That's really God, really. It is Divine light in pure form imbuing the body with life and giving a person consciousness, even individuality. We are truly made "in the image of God," and that image allows us to be human, and at the same time Godly. It empowers us and allows us to do remarkable things and accomplish amazing feats.

Then there is the world that He maintains around us, re-creating it ever moment but in a manner that allows for continuity and, the illusion of being on autopilot. Through it, God runs history in such a way that it creates the opportunities we need to meaningfully use life and fulfill its objectives. It's all

super miraculous but on a such a continuous basis that we fail to appreciate its supernatural reality and instead consider it to be "natural." We don't realize that it is something for which we need to thank God.

In addition to all of this there is something called "*Siyita d'Shemaya*," Aramaic words that mean, "Heavenly help." If everything is God, you may be wondering, then what role is there for help from Heaven? What have we been receiving until now?

This answer has to do with *Hashgochah Pratis*, or Divine Providence, of which there are two levels. There is covert Providence, about which we have been speaking until now. This is the level of *Hashgochah* that we tend to call "nature," the one by which man is so easily fooled into thinking that the world can run itself, skill is part of our physical make-up, and success is the result of our own preparation and effort.

Overt *Hashgochah* is a whole notch higher. It is a level of which we can clearly see that success cannot be attributed to anything about us or what we have done. Naturally-speaking, we should have come up short. Given the odds, we should have failed either partially or completely, yet didn't.

That's when people throw around the "M" word, or the "S" word, acknowledging that success was either miraculous or supernatural, two words for the same idea. Those who have difficulty with the "G" concept, prefer the "L" word, for "luck." Whatever it is called it is still the same thing: *siyita d'Shemaya*, or overt Divine Providence.

If so, then where do we fit into all of this? We started off assuming that all that we do and achieve is because of us, and mused about the role God might play in all of it. Now the question is reversed: It is all God, so what role do we play in we do and set out to achieve?

We have two roles to play. The first is to consciously will to do that which God wants done to complete and rectify His Creation. We were created to be His partners in "*Tikun Ma'aseh Bereishis*," the rectification of Creation. We have to become conscious of this, discover what needs to be done, figure out how we can do it, then "will" to accomplish it. Whatever happens after is God's business because by that point we have already done ours.

The second role we play is, while and after doing whatever it is we are doing, to recognize and acknowledge that everything comes from God. We are supposed to be conscious of this and express our gratitude towards God of life and the opportunities to accomplish. This connects us to our Creator and allows for a more personalized relationship with Him.

Part of this second role is to use our accomplishments as a means to publicize to others God's involvement in our lives and history in general. God has "hidden" Himself so that we should seek and find Him. Once we have, to whatever extent we can, we should help others do the same. There is no greater *Kiddush Hashem*—sanctification of the Divine Name—than removing doubt about God's existence and His involvement in the affairs of man.

This brings us back to our original discussion about self-confidence and its true source. A person does not need to know his physical limitations, but his spiritual limitations. To the extent that a person believes all that has been said above is the extent to which he can accomplish almost anything. Not being fooled by his physical nature and "natural" abilities, God can "afford" to work in more obvious ways through such a person. This is especially so for the person who only wishes to perform the will of God.

Self-confidence, for this person, is not self-belief. It is belief in God, the way God works, the way God works through people. Can do something? Can't do something? There is only "do" to the best of one's ability as the definition of success. The results have nothing to do with a person, only with God and His master plan.

The *parshah* says this. The term God uses for "counting" is a word that also means "lift up." God wasn't only telling Moshe to count the Levi'im, but He was telling him to make the Levi'im count. He told Moshe Rabbeinu to show the Levi'im the importance of their work, which could be dangerous at times, and what it meant to the rectification of the world.

Moshe was supposed to help the Levi'im realize that they were special conduits for the Divine light capable of accomplishing great things through their service in the Mishkan. As the name "Levi" suggests, they are an important intermediary between God and the Jewish people, and it would be a mistake to let self-belief, or the lack of it, interfere with the opportunity to fill that role.

Was Moshe successful at this important and difficult task? The role the Levi'im played at Mt. Sinai in response to the golden calf proves just how successful. Was there any failure or backlash? In a few weeks from now we will learn about some of it. Indeed, Korach will use the role of the Levi'im as his pretext to challenge Moshe Rabbeinu and usurp the leadership.

In the meantime, the point is clear. Self-confidence is crucial for life and success. It is not, however, synonymous with self-belief which can, and often does undermine self-confidence. Instead, it is belief in the fact that everything we are and everything we do comes from God. It is the knowledge that we have succeeded the moment we commit ourselves to doing all we can to further the cause of the completion of Creation.

Text

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